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EPA Environmental News

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EPA Seeks Information on Water Disposal/Recycling in Natural Gas Drilling Operations in Pennsylvania

PHILADELPHIA (May 10, 2011) The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today directed six natural gas drillers in Pennsylvania to disclose how and where the companies dispose of or recycle drilling process water. The action is one of the immediate steps EPA is taking as part of its ongoing effort to ensure drilling operations are protective of public health and the environment.

"We want to make sure that the drillers are handling their wastewater in an environmentally responsible manner," said EPA mid-Atlantic Regional Administrator Shawn M. Garvin.

EPA's action follows a request by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP) asking drillers to voluntarily stop taking wastewater to Pennsylvania wastewater treatment plants by May 19. The companies must report back to EPA by May 25 with information on the disposal or recycling of their drilling process water.

The companies receiving the information requests are: Atlas Resources L.L.C.; Talisman Energy USA; Range Resources – Appalachia, L.L.C.; Cabot Gas and Oil Corporation; SWEPI, LP; and, Chesapeake Energy Corporation. These six companies account for more than 50 percent of the natural gas drilling in Pennsylvania.

EPA has also requested that PADEP:

- Notify EPA of any wastewater treatment facilities that will continue to accept Marcellus Shale after May 19;
- Revise permits for wastewater treatment plants accepting Marcellus Shale gas wastewater to include protective effluent limits on gas drilling pollutants of concern, such as Total Dissolved Solids, chlorides and radionuclides, and to contain other appropriate measures to protect water quality;
- Take action to ensure that any new practices for disposing of drilling wastewater are legally enforceable under state law;
- Apply water quality standards for the protection of drinking water at the point of wastewater discharge, rather than at the point of first downstream drinking water intake;
- Consider more "representative" sampling where drinking water facilities are downstream of treatment plants accepting Marcellus Shale gas wastewater; and
- Note that EPA will be addressing the necessary authorization from the federal Underground Injection Control program for any placement of fluids in injection wells or bore holes.

EPA requested these actions in a letter to PADEP Secretary Michael Krancer dated May 11. The letter also asked the state agency take action to ensure that any new practices for disposing of drilling wastewater are legally enforceable under state law.

Natural gas holds promise for an increased role in America's energy future. EPA is working with federal, state and local partners to ensure that public health and the environment are protected from potential adverse impacts from natural gas extraction activities.

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